

OIF five-year anniversary hits home

By: Pfc. Lalita Laksbergs

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SPRINGFIELD, Illinois – “Never a day goes by that someone doesn’t want to shake my hand and tell me thank you. It’s humbling and almost embarrassing,” said Staff Sgt. Samer Elguindy, with the 341st Military Intelligence Unit, Chicago. “The one thing that has not changed over the past five years is the support of the troops.”

March 19 marked the five-year anniversary of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Today, more than 9,000 Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers and 3,700 Illinois Air National Guard personnel have served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Elguindy, a 13-year Guard veteran of the Illinois Army National Guard, was deployed with the 933rd Military Police Company, Chicago, February 2003 to July 2004. The company’s mission was to secure the main supply route between Nasiriyah and Scania. Elguindy’s squad was also responsible for training the first highway patrol team in southern Iraq.

Elguindy, currently on Active Duty for Special Work orders with Recruiting and Retention, answers questions and concerns about military life and deployment on a daily basis.

“I remind people of the bigger picture,” said Elguindy. “There was a little (Iraqi) girl, probably 12 years old, who was now able to go to school, and then would come home and work on the family farm all day. She was happy. That’s what makes it all worthwhile,” remembered Elguindy. Progress continues within Iraq in reconstruction efforts and improvements to quality of life, but those changes do not come without sacrifice.

Sixteen Illinois Guardsmen and women have made the ultimate sacrifice in support of the Global War on Terror. Sixteen Soldiers have been killed in action in Iraq. The memory of their service and dedication is not lost to those who served with them.

One of those Soldiers was Sgt. Shawna Morrison, assigned to the Illinois Army National Guard 1544th Transportation Company, Paris.

“I remember seeing her around town. I helped recruit her. It was like losing a family member,” said Sgt. 1st Class Raymond Butler, with the 1544th Transportation Company.

Butler was deployed with the 1544th December 2003 to February 2005. The company was responsible for convoy security missions country-wide and while delivering emergency supplies to Najaf when roads were “black,” which means no travel was allowed.

“You could see a difference when we were over there. There are differences being made,” said Butler, a 15-year Guard veteran and Paris native. Butler explained the five-year anniversary is important to remember.

“I still have a lot of friends deployed,” he said. “When I first got into the Guard, I realized that the person I was standing next to in information was one of the guys I had played basketball or football against. I remember thinking that I used to play against the guy and I hated him, but now we are here for the same reason.”

From small towns to big cities, Illinois citizens across the state have answered the call to duty to not only serve their communities, but also their country.

“There are 13 million people in Illinois and 13,000 Illinois Guardsmen, all of whom are volunteers. They are one in a thousand,” said Maj. Gen. (IL) William Enyart, Adjutant General of the Illinois National Guard. “Without their service to our great nation, we wouldn’t be where we are today.”

A sense of service and patriotism not only attracts new recruits to the Guard, but also prior service members who appreciate the camaraderie and sense of duty to complete a mission.

“After 9-11, I rejoined the military by joining the National Guard,” said Sgt. Jason Drake, with the Illinois Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Command, Beardstown. Drake retired from the U.S. Navy and is a six-year Illinois Guard veteran.

“I volunteered for deployment. I was not originally attached to the unit deploying,” said Drake. “There was no way my guys, who I trained with, were going to go over without me.”

Drake, a Charleston, Ill. native, was deployed January 2005 to April 2006, and was assigned to the Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry. Drake’s unit was responsible for patrol and force protection.

“I have to remind myself we’ve been there for five years. I know we did good, positive things,” Drake said. “The Iraqis knew we were there for the right reasons. It changed my outlook on the situation over there.”

Though all Soldiers sacrifice personal lives, civilian careers and the comforts of home while deployed overseas, they do so knowing their service is a vital part of a mission to defend our nation and its interests around the world.

“The debate goes on, even after five years, but the support of the troops has never diminished,” emphasized Elguindy.

There are currently approximately 550 Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers and 100 Illinois Airmen deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom